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ABSTRACT

Some children, adolescents, and adults have used humor when responding to a drawing task. The humor tends to reflect their own situations as well as attitudes toward self and others, fantasies and moods. After presenting a brief review of background literature, this paper describes the various kinds of humor observed, and presents the findings of several studies. The findings suggest that it may be worthwhile to examine responses by students who tend to act out. If relationships between responses to drawing tasks and behaviors emerge, the scales might serve as a screening technique for the early identification of students at risk for aggressive behavior who might benefit from preventative or therapeutic programs. (GCP)

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Humorous Responses to a Drawing Task, Ranging from Lethal to Playful

by

Rawley Silver

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Humorous Responses to a Drawing Task, Ranging from Lethal to Playful

Rawley Silver, Ed.D, ATR, HLM

Some children, adolescents, and adults have used humor when responding to a drawing task. The humor tends to reflect their own situations as well as attitudes toward self and others, fantasies and moods. After presenting a brief review of background literature, this paper describes the various kinds of humor observed, presents the findings of several studies, and suggests implications for current and future research.

Background

Ziv (1984) has proposed that humor serves various functions. It enables us to defend ourselves against fears by laughing at them and providing a sense of mastery. It helps us face reality, relieve tension, avoid depression, and deny dangers by making them appear ridiculous. Aggressive humor serves to hide aggressive feelings by enabling us to punish others and feel superior in a socially acceptable way. Self-disparaging humor serves to win sympathy and reduce anxiety. Intellectual humor creates new meanings through absurdity and incongruity, and sexual humor allows us to deal openly with social taboos.

Vaillard (1992, 2002) observed that humor reflects a mature defense or coping style. It permits us to look directly at what is painful, laugh at our own misery, vent angry feelings, and loose blunt arrows against others. Under stress, mature defenses may change to less mature defenses, such as passive-aggressive behavior (expressing aggression toward others indirectly) or acting out (directly expressing unconscious wishes or impulses.

Mango and Richman (1990) hypothesized that humorous drawings serve to express emotional states. They told their patients jokes, asked them to "draw something funny that happened to you," and then discuss their drawings. Although few of the situations depicted were amusing, the task brought problems into discussion, enabled the patients to feel empathy, and enabled the therapists to direct group discussions toward solving problems.

A recent study collected a sample of humorous responses to the drawing from imagination task of *The Silver Drawing Test* and *Draw A Story* assessments (Silver, 1983/2002). This task asks respondents to choose two stimulus drawings from an array of people, animals, places and things; imagine something happening between the subjects chosen; and then draw what is happening. Respondents are encouraged to alter the stimulus drawings and add subjects of their own. As they finish drawing, they are asked to add stories or titles, and whenever possible, discuss their responses so that meanings can be clarified. Each assessment presents a different set of 12 or more stimulus drawings, three of which are reproduced below. (see page 3a)

This study reviewed 849 responses, finding 142 drawings (17%) that seemed to express humorous intent (Silver, 2001, 2002). Produced by respondents in 5 age groups, ranging from children to senior adults, their drawings were divided into five categories of humor: lethal (joking about death or annihilation), disparaging, ambiguous or ambivalent, resilient, and playful, as will be discussed later. The humor was predominantly negative; 43% disparaging and 32% lethal.

A second study added responses to the stimulus drawings of another assessment, *Stimulus Drawings & Techniques* (Silver, 1983/2002). The study included 164 subjects previously diagnosed as emotionally disturbed, and 724 who presumably were not disturbed. The findings revealed gender and age differences in the kinds of humor expressed. Results, as measured by analyses of variance, indicated that males produced significantly more humorous responses than females (X^2 (1) =37.3, $p < .01$). Males also produced more negative humor than females, a tendency that reached borderline significance (X^2 (4) = 7.85, $p < .10$). No females portrayed cruelty or suffering whereas the males who did so were all adolescents; 3 of whom were emotionally disturbed.

In addition, three studies found that strongly negative responses to the drawing

task were associated with clinical depression (Silver, 1993, 2002). Chi-square analyses indicated that significantly more depressed than non-depressed children and adolescents responded with strongly negative drawings scored 1 point in emotional content (27.63, $p < .001$). What might be the significance of responses that express strongly negative humor? .

Lethal Humor

Humorous response drawings that depict death or annihilation have appeared in two forms. One form suggests that the respondent finds amusing drawings about pain, fear, and death, and seems to expect viewers to be amused (and/or shocked) by the grisly image. For example, "Cat Gut Revenge," figure 1, was the response of a college freshman who had selected three stimulus drawings from the SDT array: the cat, mouse, and knife. His drawing suggests a wish-fulfilling fantasy, what he would like to do to someone, disguised but represented by his cat.

Another example of humor that is both lethal and morbid, "Godzilla vs Mighty Mouse,"(figure 2) was the response of a male adolescent who had selected the dinosaur and mouse from the *Draw A Story* array of stimulus drawings. On the scale for assessing humor, both drawings receive the lowest, most negative score, 1 point.

Lethal but not morbid humor also appears in responses to the drawing task. This kind of humor, often referred to as "gallows humor," scores 1.5 points. It seems to laugh at death, but does not depict suffering or grisly details. Instead, the victim simply vanishes or is dispatched out of sight. Examples are shown in figures 3 and 4, "Cat Eats Mouse," and "Amy found that James only married her for her trust funds...", both by young women.

Disparaging Humor

Humorous responses that disparage but don't destroy their subjects also appear in two forms. The first form makes fun of some one's misfortune, ridiculing others not ones' self, and scores 2 points. For example, "The Scared Dragon," (figure 5) seems to express the wish-fulfilling fantasy of a male adolescent diagnosed as emotionally disturbed. Another example of disparaging humor, "Woman sees mouse, cries for help!" (figure 6) was the response of a senior man.

The second form of disparaging humor jokes about fears and feelings of inadequacy, making fun of one's own misfortunes, and scores 2.5 points. The ability to laugh at one's self suggests the ability to face painful reality and accept what cannot be changed. For example, "I am a Pisces, so where is the other fish?" (figure 7) was the response of a senior woman joking about loneliness. "Fear of Animals," (figure 8) by a senior man, seems to represent himself as the artist, dueling with what he fears, but likely to lose. A previous study found that a sample of senior adults used self-disparaging humor more often, and drew humorous responses more often, than the samples of children, adolescents, and young adults (Silver, 1993a).

Ambivalent or Ambiguous Humor

Responses that are unclear or suggest ambivalence, neither or both negative and positive, receive the intermediate score, 3 points. They may reflect guardedness or conflicts not resolved. To illustrate, figure 9, titled, "Help!" was the response of a boy, age 12. Asked what might happen to his parachutist, he replied, "Well, maybe somebody will rescue him." Figure 10, "The Snake and the Mouse," by a man age 82, also scores 3 points because the snake's embrace could be delicious for the snake but disastrous for the mouse.

Resilient Humor

Responses that tilt toward hopeful outcomes, or show losers winning after all, score 4 points. To illustrate, the drawing titled, "In this country a worm has to fly," (figure 11) was the response of a senior man who chose the stimulus drawing worm and the desert landscape. He endowed his worm with wings, however, enabling it to soar above the desert and avoid its dangers and deprivations. Figure 12, another resilient response, is a series of drawings without

Lethal and Morbid Humor, Scored 1 point

Figure 1. "Cat Gut Revenge," by a male adolescent.

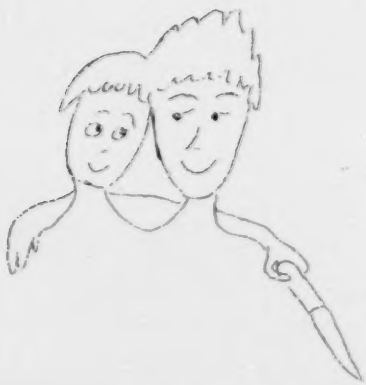
Figure 2. "Godzilla vs Mighty Mouse," by a male adolescent.

GODZILLA VS MIGHTY MOUSE
Godzilla bites Mighty Mouse tail off.
Godzilla gobble mighty mouse up in one chomp
Godzilla plays

Lethal but Not Morbid humor, Scored 1.5 points

Figure 3. "Cat Eats Mouse," by a younger woman.

Figure 4. "Amy found that James only married her for her trust fund, and that he is sleeping with her sister," by a younger woman.



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Disparaging Humor, Scored 2 Points

Figure 5. "The Scared Dragon," by a male adolescent.

Figure 6. "Woman sees mouse, cries for help!," by an older man.

Self-Disparaging Humor, Scored 2.5 points

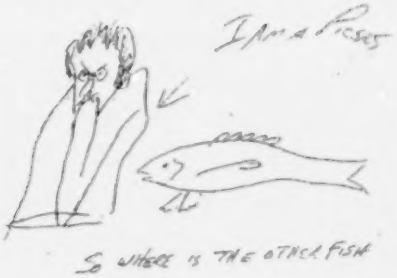
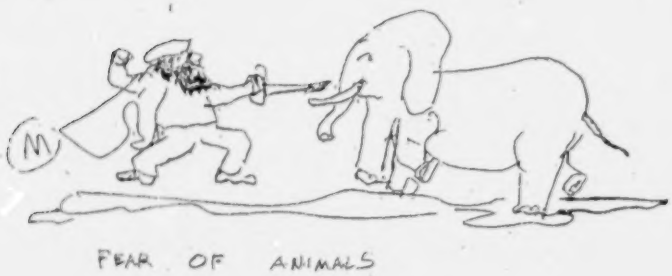


Figure 7. by an older woman

Figure 8. "Fear of Animals," by an older man.



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Ambivalent or Ambiguous Humor, Scored 3 points

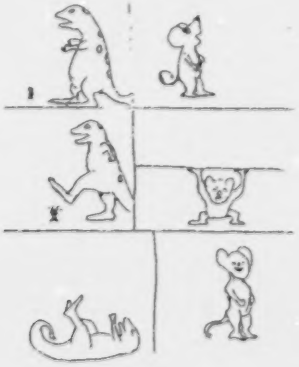
Figure 9. "Help!" by a boy age 12.

Figure 10. "The snake and the mouse," by an older man.

Resilient Humor, Scored 4 points

Figure 11. In this country a word has to fly," by an older man.

Figure 12. Untitled drawings by a [illegible]



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Playful Humor, Scored 5 points

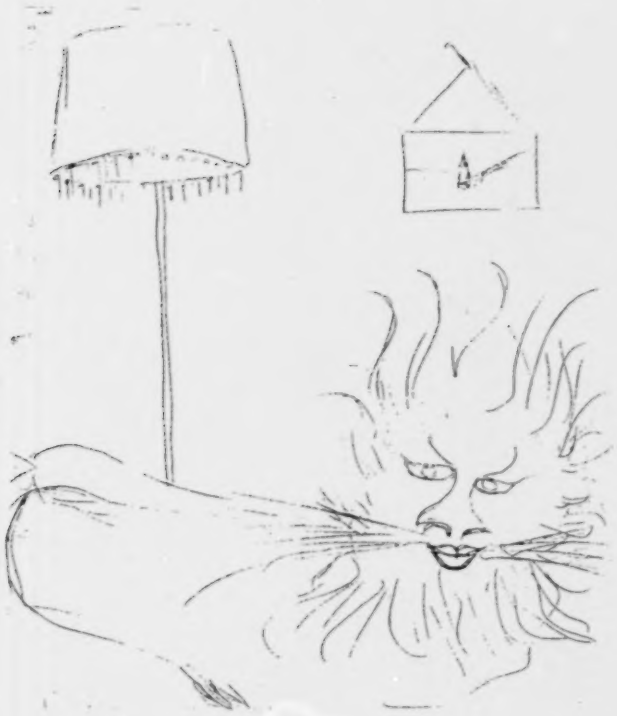

Figure 13. "Lyin' in the living room," by a younger woman.

Figure 14. "Cat sip or cat-a-tonic," by a younger man.

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Figure 15. Guidelines for Scoring Humorous Response Drawings

1 point: *Lethal and Morbid Humor*
Amused by subject(s) dying painfully or in mortal danger and overtly expressing pain and/or fear, either through words or images

1.5 points: *Lethal but not Morbid Humor*
Amused by subject(s) disappearing, dead, or in mortal danger but not expressing pain and/or fear, either through words or images

2 points: *Disparaging humor*
Amused by a principal subject who is unlike the respondent (such as opposite gender) and unattractive, frustrated, foolish, or unfortunate, but not in mortal danger.

2.5 points: *Self-disparaging humor*
Uses personal pronoun and/or is amused by a principal subject who is like the respondent as well as unattractive, frustrated, foolish, or unfortunate, but not in mortal danger

3. points: *Ambiguous or Ambivalent* humor (neutral)
Meaning or outcome is both negative and positive, neither negative nor positive, or unclear

4 points: *Resilient humor* (more positive than negative)
Principal subject(s) overcomes adversity or outcome is hopeful or favorable.

5. points: *Playful humor* (entirely positive)
Kindly, absurd, or a play on words, such as rhyme or pun

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Table 1: Humorous Responses to the SDT, DAS, and SD Drawing Tasks

Age	Gender (n = 142)		Lethal		Disparaging		Ambiguous	Resilient	Playful
	Male	Female	1	1.5	2	2.5	3	4	5
9-12	8		0	2	4	0	1	1	0
		5	0	2	0	1	0	1	1
13-19	34		6	7	13	1	0	3	4
		16	0	4	4	4	2	0	2
20+	16		0	4	4	0	6	0	2
		19	0	2	5	3	0	0	9
65+	20		0	1	5	6	3	2	3
		11	0	2	4	2	0	2	1
ED	10		4	2	3	0	0	0	1
		3	0	2	1	0	0	0	0
Total	88	54	10	28	43	17	12	9	23
Percentage	62%	38%	7%	20%	30%	12%	8%	6%	16%

words, by a male adolescent, age 17. The series begins with a mouse facing a dinosaur that is about to trample it underfoot. The mouse however, small but powerful, lifts the giant paw, topples the dinosaur, and laughs.

Playful Humor

The kind of humor that receives the highest, most positive score, 5 points, seems motivated by high spirits and good will. It tends to have absurd subjects, witty titles, and little emotional involvement, if any. "Lyin' in the living room," by a young woman (figure 13) and "Cat sip or cat-a-tonic," by a young man (figure 14) both score 5 points.

The previous study examined the reliability of the scale designed for assessing humor, with inconclusive results. Two art therapists had met for approximately one hour to discuss and practice scoring humorous responses to the drawing task. Subsequently, they scored 16 humorous responses, individually and without discussion. As measured by the Pearson correlation, the reliability of their ratings was calculated as 0.77, showing reliability but suggesting that the scale could be more precise.

Procedures

The present study examined the inter-scorer reliability of a revised scale for assessing humorous responses, as shown in Figure 15. Three art therapists, two of whom had received registration (ATR), served as judges. One lived in Oregon, another in Pennsylvania, and the third, in Florida. Each received a copy of the revised guidelines and a set of 15 humorous responses to the Drawing from Imagination task by children, adolescents, young adults, and senior adults. The judges practiced scoring humorous responses, and discussed their scores via telephone and email. Gradually, the scoring guidelines became more precise until they felt they agreed on the meaning of each score. Then the judges received a final set of 12 different humorous responses. After scoring the second set without discussion, they mailed their scores to Brooke Butler, PhD. for statistical analysis. In addition, the responses were examined for age and gender similarities and differences.

Results

Scorer reliability. Using reliability analysis, Dr Butler found a reliability coefficient of 0.861, which exceeds the minimum level of acceptability (i.e., 0.80). This finding indicates that the revised Humor Scale (figure 15) is reliable for scoring humorous responses to the Drawing from Imagination task.

Age and gender differences and similarities. Humorous intent was found in 142 response drawings, 16% of the 888 responses examined. The humor was predominantly negative (69%) more than three times the 22% of responses that were positive). In addition, negative humor appeared significantly more often in male responses, as analyzed in the previous study of humorous responses cited (see page 2) (Silver, 2002).

Disparaging humor appeared in 42% of the negative responses, the largest proportion, 12% were self-disparaging whereas 30% made fun of other subjects, as shown in Table 1. Lethal humor appeared in 27% of the negative responses, the largest proportion, 20% were lethal but not morbid, while 10 responses (7%) were morbid as well as lethal. Male adolescents produced all of the morbid responses, receiving the lowest, most negative score of 1 point. Six of the adolescents were presumably normal high school and college students, while 4 had been diagnosed as emotionally disturbed.

Implications

Now that the scale for assessing humor has been found reliable, it can be used to expand the information provided by scales for evaluating the emotional content and self-images of responses to the SDT, DAS, and SD assessments. The scales have served as pretest-

posttest measures in therapeutic and educational programs (Silver, 1996, 2001, 2002). For example, a study of delinquent adolescents in Thailand (Dhanachitsiriphong (1999) found the SDT posttest scores of the experimental group significantly higher than the posttest scores of the control group in emotional and cognitive content following an art therapy program, as measured by the Howell and Newman-Keuls procedures. On the pretest, no significant differences appeared between experimental and control groups consisting of adolescents whose emotional Content Scores were lower than the percentile rank of 25%, and cognitive scores higher than the percentile rank of 75%. Higher posttest scores on the humor scale could also reflect effective intervention. Previous studies have also found that responses scored 1 point in Emotional Content and Self-Image can be used to screen for students at risk for depression (Silver, 1993, 2001,2002).

The findings of the present study raise questions about the behavior of respondents who seem amused by murderous fantasies. Could their drawings serve to identify those who may be at risk for aggressive or violent behavior, or does joking about committing murder tend to defuse the anger expressed indirectly through drawings? The findings suggest that it may be worthwhile to examine responses by students who tend to act out. If relationships between scores and behaviors emerge, the scales might serve as a screening technique for the early identification of students at risk for aggressive behavior who might benefit from preventative or therapeutic programs.

I would like to thank the judges who participated in the study of rater reliability and the psychologist who performed the statistical analyses. They include Christine Turner, ATR, Director of the Art Therapy Program at Marylhurst University, Victoria Anderson, MA; and Brooke Butler, PhD, University of South Florida.

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